

IX. GORGES STATE PARK LAND ACQUISITION

On April 29, 1999, thanks to a partnership of industry, the environmental community and the state of North Carolina 10,000 acres of the Jocassee Gorges in Transylvania County were placed in public ownership to be conserved for future generations of North Carolinians. The property was purchased by the state from Duke Energy Corporation, and the transaction created the 2,900-acre Toxaway Game Land managed by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, and Gorges State Park.

Gorges State Park contains 7,172 acres and has biological, geological, and scenic significance. It contains deep gorges, waterfalls, sheer rock walls, rare plants and animals, and diverse natural communities. The elevation rises 2,000 feet in only three miles and rainfall exceeds 80 inches per year. This rare combination of conditions supports a temperate rain forest and a number of waterfalls.

LAND PROTECTION PLANNING

As the master plan for Gorges State Park was developed, the subject of the additional resource requirements for the park was addressed. The objectives for creating Gorges State Park are the protection of the unique natural resources, buffering these resources and visitor activities, protecting scenic views, and providing appropriate public recreational use. In accordance with these objectives, the adjacent lands have been reviewed and this plan addresses the future protection needs of Gorges State Park.

Several factors are considered to determine whether a piece of property should be included in a protection plan. Properties that contain or buffer rare species, natural communities, high water quality, and natural features are given the highest priority. Data from division staff surveys of the properties, the Natural Heritage Program, and the Division of Water Quality are used as information sources for locating the resources in need of protection. Threats to these properties can be logging, development, and sedimentation from upstream development as well as other forms of irreparable damage.

Properties that provide land for the construction of park facilities and that provide buffer for visitor activities also are reasons to include property within the protection plan. The North Carolina State Parks System exists to serve the state's citizens in many capacities. Providing the necessary space to carry out recreational and educational activities is part of the Division's mission and is a key reason to include property in a protection plan. This also applies to properties that protect scenic elements of the landscape. One purpose of the park is to maintain natural beauty for the public to see.

The provision of safe access and clear and simple boundaries are also factors in determining which properties are included in the protection plan. Public access to park land is key for a park to be viable. If the public and staff are unable reach the park resources, the park does not fulfill

its purpose. In order to properly manage and enforce regulations, park boundaries need to be easily accessed and identifiable.

LAND ISSUES AT GORGES STATE PARK

The total acreage of property identified as future needs for Gorges State Park is 2,469 acres. (Figure IX-1) During the planning process for protection needs for Gorges State Park, three levels of priority were established.

Priority 1: Properties identified in the first level of priority are those properties that are vital to the current and future operation of Gorges State Park. Priority one properties are shown in Figure IX-1 and the total area is 333 acres.

The properties identified on the east side of the Duke transmission line and adjacent to the park boundary as it stretches to Highway 64 are to provide access control to Bear Wallow Falls. Also identified in that general area are properties to protect the water quality of Bear Wallow Creek as it enters the park just above Bear Wallow Falls. These properties also have great value to the park due to the potential scenic impact to the park that would occur if these properties were developed.

The properties from the base of the Toxaway Falls to the park boundary and to the west are included to protect the water quality of the Toxaway River. These properties include the river and adjacent drainage ridge to the west.

On the east side of the park, the Division would like to acquire the property identified at Frozen Knob. This property will provide water quality protection for Frozen Creek, better access control, boundary management, and viewshed protection.

Priority 2: The second level of priority encompasses the properties that contain natural resources, buffer waterways, or provide better access to existing park resources. Priority two properties are shown in Figure IX-1 and the total area is 716 acres.

On the north side of the park, further land protection is needed to protect the water quality of the Toxaway River, Panther Branch, and Indian Creek. These properties run from the east portion of the Toxaway River to where the Continental Divide meets the park boundary. All of these streams flow through the core of the park into Lake Jocassee and provide vital habitat for many rare plants and animals.

Priority 3: The properties identified as third level of priority are those that are in the watershed for Lake Jocassee and would provide additional land for the development of park facilities. Priority three properties are shown in Figure IX-1 and the total area is 1,420 acres. The acquisition of the properties identified in this priority should occur on a willing-seller basis as funding allows.

The Division would like to protect the Frozen Creek watershed as well as much of the Toxaway Creek and Rock Creek watersheds. Natural Heritage data show that several naturally significant communities exist along these streams. The land identified as future needs would also provide excellent natural buffer to the existing park. The planned future needs boundary along Flat Creek Road would also provide a clearer boundary for park management.

APPROACHES

Having identified the three levels of priority for properties identified as future needs for Gorges State Park, three alternative approaches to protection have been formulated. These three approaches allow for park growth according to different reasons for protection. The first approach focuses only on the protection of the first priority. These properties are those vital to the effective management and development of the park. The total acreage for this approach is 333 acres.

The second approach incorporates the vital needs identified as priority one needs as well as those identified as priority two needs. The properties identified as priority two address resource management and protection issues that are key concerns for the park. The total acreage for this approach is 1,049 acres.

The third approach includes all the properties identified as future needs for the Gorges State Park. The priority three properties would provide additional natural resource protection and potential facility development sites. This would be in addition to the properties identified in priorities one and two. The total acreage for this approach would be 2,469 acres.

One park management issue is the lack of public access to the Horsepasture River's Turtleback Falls and Rainbow Falls on US Forest Service land adjacent to Gorges State Park. The falls are a very popular destination for many visitors for their scenic value and as a water recreational opportunity. The Division would like to see this area managed to allow the general public better access to these resources, to decrease emergency response time, and to improve visitor services. If in the future the US Forest Service would like to divest the Horsepasture property, the Division would like to obtain it in fee simple. Refer to Chapter VIII for further discussion of the Horsepasture River.

PROTECTION SUMMARY TABLE

Current size of the park (Nov 2003)	7,172 acres
Priority One needs	333 acres
Priority Two needs	716 acres
Priority Three needs	<u>1,420 acres</u>
Total planned needs	<u>2,469 acres</u>
Total planned size of the park	9,641 acres

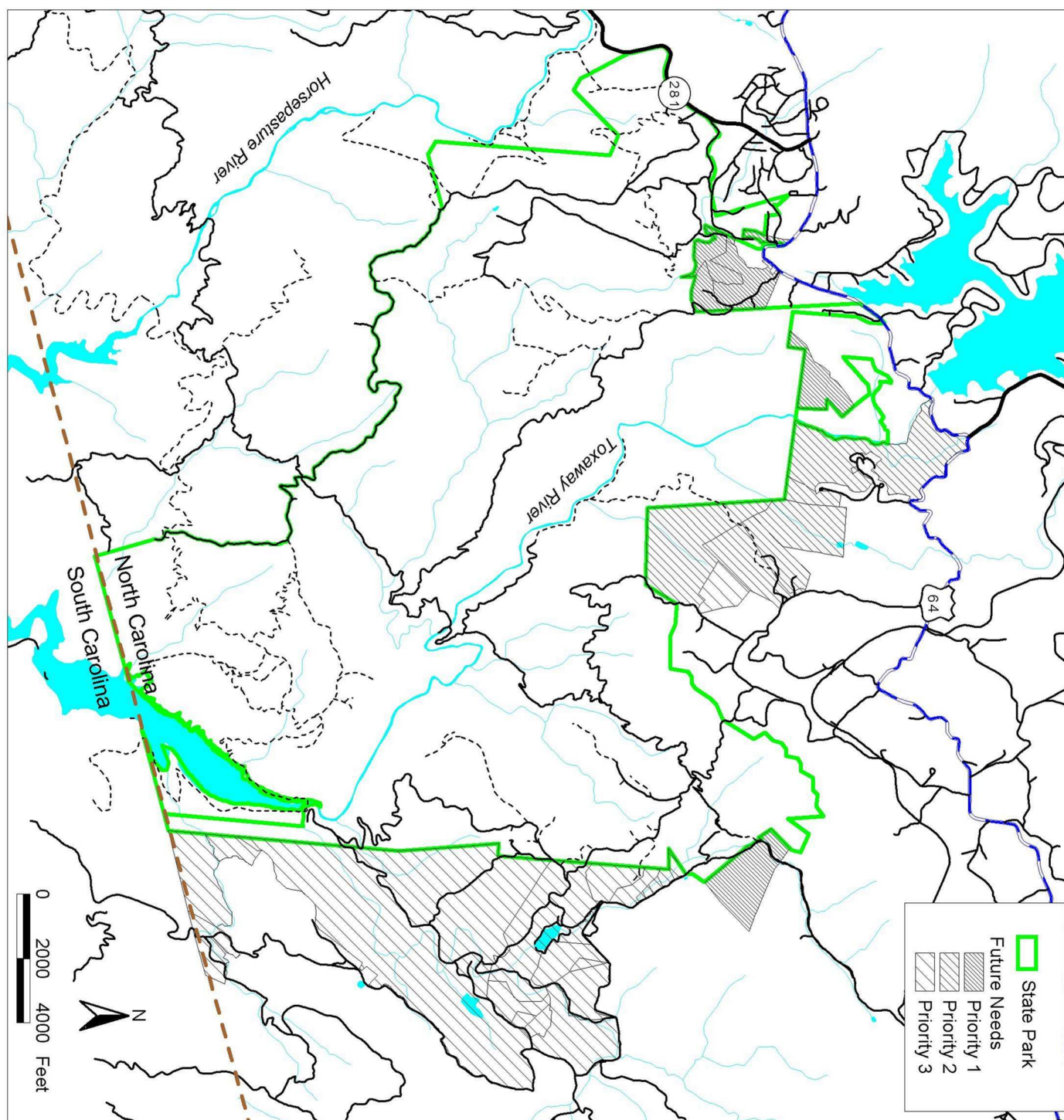


Figure IX-1. Gorges Land Acquisition Needs
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